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Beslan and the Nature of Modern Terrorism

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Introduction

On September 1, 2004 a group of Chechen rebels seized a school in Beslan, a town in North Ossetia, a small southern republic in the middle of the Caucasus. Demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya, they held inside a school gymnasium more than 1100 hostages, mostly children. The standoff ended on September 3, resulting in 329 deaths, among them 171 children. Images of mutilated children's corpses shocked the conscience of the international community, and attested to the pitiless nature of terrorist violence.

As with the high-lethality attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, in Bali on October 12, 2002, and in Spain on March 11, 2004, the Beslan atrocities confirm that when it comes to radical Islamist terrorism, contingencies are unpredictable. The terrorist's growing focus on 'soft' targets undermines the population's sense of personal security, and in turn challenges the government's effectiveness in ensuring national security.

September 11 illustrated a post-Cold War dynamic: power, as the prerogative of states, is anachronistic, and governments find themselves increasingly vulnerable to transnational threats such as terrorism. The dire reality is that states will not be immune to catastrophic violence perpetrated by terrorist groups motivated by distorted ideologies.

The (mostly democratic) states that unequivocally condemn terrorism face a strategic dilemma. The struggle against this destructive phenomenon does not fit a conventional war paradigm; it is difficult to wage a war on terror and equally difficult to measure military or political success. The force that the free societies confront is extremely potent and global in nature, with al-Qa'ida as its epitome. Due to its exceptional regenerative abilities, the complete eradication of al-Qa'ida is impossible; even subverting its operational capacity is extremely difficult. Accordingly, the struggle against the global Islamist network of terror is asymmetrical and open-ended.

The recent events in Beslan attest to fact that the threat of international terrorism represents a "Big Chill"[1] of the twenty-first century. The hostage-taking reinforces three realities about the nature of international terrorism fueled by religious fervour.

First, as a form of coercion, terrorism is different from a struggle for national liberation. Adhering to a geopolitically neutral and non-grievance-based definition of terrorism allows us to make this distinction. Second, as states are asymmetrically vulnerable to the ideologically unified global terrorist network, conventional deterrence cannot be considered a viable defence strategy. Consequently, it is important to avoid conceiving of current strategy against terrorism as 'war'. Instead, it is advisable to regard it as a struggle with no temporal boundaries.

An Objective Definition of Terrorism

Despite the fact that the international community acknowledges that violence perpetrated against noncombatants[2] constitute an act of terror, a precise definition of terrorism is a matter of heated debate. This despite the availability of a relatively impartial set of criteria which clearly demarcates terrorism from legitimate struggles for national liberation.

The definition of terrorism proposed by Alex Schmid, a senior officer in crime prevention and criminal justice at the UN's terrorism branch in Vienna, encapsulates the fundamental dimensions of terrorist violence:

> Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat – and violence –based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. [3]

Schmid's definition is valid because it is geopolitically neutral and non-grievance-based. The definition incorporates quintes-

sential characteristics of terrorism, describing it as a strategic, systematic, premeditated, unpredictable, indiscriminate, audacious, dehumanizing and psychologically paralyzing form of violence. These general parameters inject a measure of objectivity which is absent from definitions based on subjective political criteria (i.e. 'One man's terrorist is another's freedom-fighter.') Such definitions imply double standards in distinguishing terrorism from other premeditated acts of violence.

It is noteworthy that Schmid refrains from attributing terrorism to a single motivation. In his view, terrorism may be waged for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons. This avoidance of rigid typological categorization in the conceptualization of terrorism is important because it leads to defining terrorism in terms of its mode of operation (means), and not in terms of its aim (end).

There is much to be gained by differentiating terrorism from other types of violence based on *modus operandi*. The major advantage is that this approach enables states to develop a cause-neutral system of legal instruments whereby the 'terrorist' stigma is imposed upon the offenders based on the tactics employed in their offence(s), and not on the nature or legitimacy of their cause. Boaz Ganor, executive director of International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, correctly maintains that: "By characterizing terrorism as a mode of operation directed against civilian targets, as opposed to basing the definition on the goals of the violence, we refute the slogan that one man's 'terrorist' is another man's 'freedom fighter'."[4]

The rationale is irrefutable, because terrorists might indeed advocate a legitimate cause which resonates with the general public. Consider, for example, that all Chechens desire a sovereign state, and want the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. However, as a nation they do not demand these political concessions by means of seizing schools and slaughtering children. Similarly, notwithstanding that many in the Islamic world regard the United States as the "rogue superpower,"[5] they condemn al-Qa'ida's aggression against America. It is therefore important to understand that the overwhelming majority of civilians express their concerns through legitimate methods, whereas terrorists engage in indiscriminate and heinous violence. Consequently, it is the means used to achieve one's goals and not the belief *per se* that fundamentally distinguishes terrorism from other forms of violence. Hence, for purposes of maintaining a working definition of terrorism, references to motivations should be peripheral.

This is not to say that, in the study of terrorism, motivations are irrelevant. In fact, to implement effective counter-terrorism measures, understanding the triggering causes is imperative. Examination of the etiology of terrorism enables one to take preventive or corrective actions against the violent manifestation of grievances. The preceding arguments merely recommend dissociating motivational specifics from the definition in favour of the principle of *modus operandi*.

One final clarification may dispel the confusion about the distinction between terrorism and guerrilla warfare. According to political scientist David Rapoport, "the traditional, distinguishing characteristic of the terrorist was his explicit refusal to accept the conventional moral limits which defined military and guerrilla action."[6] Terrorists defy the moral codes that guide freedom fighters – be they anarchists, revolutionaries or guerrilla combatants – and are therefore not discriminate in their choice of targets, as are freedom fighters. For example, a true freedom fighter, trying to coerce Kremlin to change its policy in Chechnya, unlikely to be seen mercilessly shooting at children trying to escape a seized school. Otherwise stated, a freedom fighter would not be expected to instrumentally victimize randomly selected members of the public as means to pressuring the actual antagonist – the government. Hence, one can assume the freedom fighter's *modus operandi* to predicate on principles of symmetry and proportionality. In contrast, terrorists' tactics lacks proportionality, and perpetrators thrive on the asymmetry of vulnerability.

Asymmetry of Vulnerability: States vis-à-vis the Global Terrorist Network

Investigation of the Beslan terrorist attack revealed a connection of the associated group to al-Qa'ida. According to Nikolai Patrushev, director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), "in Northern Caucasus there are approximately 10 members of the al-Qa'ida international terrorist network." It is largely "due to the fact that the financing of terrorists was facilitated from abroad," that the head of the FSB considers the Beslan incident "an international terrorist action."[7] The established link of a localized terrorist group to an international terrorist matrix reinforces another dire reality – the global terrorist network is potent, audacious, determined and, above all, unstoppable in delivering "high-impact terrorism."[8]

Despite the damage that counter-terrorism activities have inflicted on al-Qa'ida's operational capacity, it continues to demonstrate remarkable regenerative and adaptive abilities. States remain asymmetrically vulnerable to trans-national terrorist network for several reasons: the enemy is self-sufficient, resilient and elusive; its incubation capacity is global; its aspirations are amorphous; its goal is maximum destruction; its imagination is boundless; its value system is anathema to the liberal mindset, and; it is undeterrable.

This has serious and complex security implications. States will never succeed in eradicating this satanic global phenomenon, and open societies will have to determine how to reduce the threat of terrorism while accepting to live with a risk of falling victims to terrorist violence.

Michael Barkun argues that even if states were to exercise their full potential in combating terrorism, they would still fail to eradicate it. According to Barkun, there is

> a disturbing paradox: the overwhelming magnitude of the perceived danger...appears to mandate an immediate and radical response. Yet even the most dramatic mobilization of capacities cannot produce the total security most people desire. If the goal is the complete elimination of a terrorist threat on American soil, even the most draconian measures will fail. We have yet, as a society, to face the question of what level of risk is acceptable.[9]

Scholars are not the only pessimists in forecasting the threat of terrorism. Similar assessments were made by the members of the 9/11 Commission, who advised that "the [United States] must prepare to deal with attacks that are not stopped."[10] Such statements are important because they help the public to avoid the complacency which leads to false sense of security. Societies should recognize that the absence of terrorist attacks for a certain period of time is not indicative of terrorism's demise. In order to understand the reasons behind the potency of the global terrorist network,

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one should consider the sources of its empowerment.

The post-Cold War shift in the traditional power paradigm has enhanced the capacity of the terrorist organizations for an independent existence. Unlike the Cold War terrorist movement, contemporary groups such as al-Qa'ida maintain a "self-sufficient infrastructure,"[11] and in their operations they generally do not depend on the support of a state. Ray Takeyh, a senior policy advisor at the Institute for Religion and Public Policy, and Nikolas Gvosdev, an executive editor of *The National Interest,* precisely observe: "Today's terrorist does not need a strong state to provide funding and supplies. Rather, it seeks a weak state that cannot impede a group's freedom of action but has the veneer of state sovereignty that prevents other, stronger states from taking effective countermeasures."[12] Hence, Joseph Nye of Harvard University is correct in labelling modern terrorism as a "privatization of war."[13] Indeed, it is the privatized nature of modern terrorism that creates conditions of asymmetrical vulnerability of states to the international terrorist network.

Cold War deterrence was predicated on the notion of strategic stability, to which three prerequisites were central: crisis stability, arms race stability and mutual vulnerability. The stability of the balance was crucial because it ensured that neither opponent in striking first had the capacity to destroy the other's ability to strike back. This system, known as mutual assured destruction (MAD) for decades ensured the mutual coexistence of the two superpowers, as well as peace and stability in the international arena.[14]

Cold War deterrence was effective because it regulated the conflict between two geographically defined and politically legitimate entities (each side recognized the other's right to exist) with territory to guard and people to defend. As Thomas Friedman, a renowned journalist of *The New York Times* correctly asserts, despite the fact that the Soviet Union was perceived to be an 'evil empire,' it nevertheless "was always deterrable…because, at the end of the day, the Soviets loved life more that they hated [the Americans]." Moreover, despite their differences, the superpowers "agreed on certain bedrock rules of civilization."[15] None of these conditions and prerequisites of effective deterrence apply to the case of al-Qa'ida.

First, as terrorism expert Brian Jenkins notes, coexistence between the legitimately established states and al-Qa'ida is not an option.[16] There is no tolerance for 'Holy War Inc.'s' existence, and as with any epidemic, the ultimate goal is to eradicate it. Second, unlike the superpowers, al-Qa'ida holds no territory nor is responsible for a population whose welfare it is afraid to jeopardize. Al-Qa'ida operatives have literally nothing to lose but their life. Third, while in principle states understand who is the enemy, in practice annihilating it is extremely difficult because the target remains inherently elusive.

The lack of certainty about al-Qa'ida makes the implementation of deterrence impossible because a threat of retaliation is compelling only when, *ceteris paribus*, it is advanced to a specific adversary, occupying a clearly defined territorial space. With al-Qa'ida sleeper cells operating from undisclosed and globally dispersed locations, and coordinating their activities in an anonymous manner, the state's capability to identify precisely the targets and issue credible threats is decidedly subverted.

The implications are obvious. While the terrorists know who and where their preferred targets are, we – the potential victims of their violence – lack certainty with respect to who and where they are. It is precisely this condition that makes nation-states asymmetrically vulnerable to the global terrorist network. According to Robert Keohane, two criteria make this asymmetry especially evident: "asymmetry of information," and "asymmetry in beliefs."[17]

The use of information technology provides for asymmetry of information. It enables terrorists to operate incognito, with a low probability of detection. This grants terrorists the information advantage vis-à-vis the state, because while the latter constitutes a well-defined and transparent entity, the former remains clandestine and unfamiliar. Hence, the asymmetry of information and the resulting asymmetry of vulnerability of a state to the global terrorist network.

An analogous pattern of vulnerability is observed with respect to the second criterion – the system of beliefs. Given that neither Osama bin Laden nor his organization are epitomes of Islam, one can argue that al-Qa'ida represents a cult that perpetuates an intrinsically imperfect "fantasy ideology."[18] Moreover – and of greater implications for security – is the fact that "in the fantasy ideology of radical Islam, suicide is not a means to an end but an end in itself."[19] This means that in strategizing its struggle, al-Qa'ida does not invoke the principles of Clausewitzian doctrine,[20] thereby waging violence "not as an instrument of policy but as an emblem of identity, an expression of community, an end in itself."[21]

Al-Qa'ida operatives are gripped by moral absolutes, passionately believing that they are fighting the global evil under the dictum of Allah, and are consciously and proudly ready to sacrifice their life for this cause. The implication is obvious – physical retaliation against terrorists is not effective, because by willing to die terrorists will always remain in the "win-win situation" – "either they will escape to fight another day, or they will be defeated and celebrated as martyrs."[22] The core dogma of a *shahid*'s mentality is "*bello ergo sum* (I fight, therefore I exist),"[23] the prevalence of which leads to a breakdown of "the eye-for-an-eye calculus of proportionality,"[24] which governs states' conduct of war. Hence, with terrorists completely devoid of fear of retaliation, states confront a situation of irrevocably asymmetrical vulnerability to the 'Holy War Inc.'

Lee Harris, a terrorism expert, contends that "it matters not how much stronger or more powerful we are than they – what matters is that God will bring them victory."[25] Hence, for purposes of developing and implementing effective counter-terrorism strategy, governments must refrain from the tendency to conceive of current policy against terrorism as 'war,' and instead should view it as endless, multi-dimensional and multi-frontal struggle.

Counter terrorism – a "Perennial Struggle"

The recently released 9/11 Commission Report stipulates that "calling this struggle [against terrorism] a war accurately describes the use of American and allied armed forces to find and destroy terrorist groups and their allies in the field…" Although the report acknowledges that counter-terrorism strategy "should be balanced,"[26] the Commission's fundamental assumption that the US is at 'war' with the terrorists is mistaken. As preceding analysis makes clear, the struggle against terrorism does not resemble a conventional war paradigm: there is no proportionality

(terrorists transgress the codes governing the conduct of war), and no probability of finality (terrorists defy Clausewitzian doctrine, and do not contemplate surrendering). Said Bruce Hoffman, director of the Washington branch of the RAND Corporation, this conflict should be perceived as "a perennial, ceaseless struggle."[27]

The wars of the past have had a beginning, a middle and an end. This does not apply to the 'war' on terror, because, in the words of Frank Harvey of Dalhousie University, this struggle "has no temporal reference point and certainly no end in sight."[28] This assertion is well-supported by bin Laden's videotaped speech, aired on the Arab language network al-Jazeera on October 29, 2004. Bin Laden vows to continue "with Allah's permission" the "policy [of] bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy."[29] This is a clear indication to nation-states that although episodic muting of terrorist acts is conceivable, the eradication of jihad international as a movement is impossible.

This bleak outlook should not be interpreted as a call to inaction; it should be regarded as a warning affixing a 'war' label to the struggle against terrorism, as this leads to a false expectation that we may be closer to winning this 'war.'

Regardless of how successful counter-terrorism efforts are, fatal terrorist incidents (even with low death toll) will be considered as significant failures, and create a major setbacks in the 'war' against terrorism. Harvey elaborates on this point by observing that "perceptions of security are based not on how many lives are saved but on how many lives were lost in an attack that no one expected."[30]

Conclusion

In 2000 Simon Reeve published a book entitled, "One Day in September" in which he recaptured and described the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the Israeli atheletes during the Munich 1972 Olympic Games. In 2001 numerous publications came out capturing the horrific 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Readers may soon find themselves reading a publication possibly entitled, "Three Days in September," describing the terrorists atrocities of September 1-3, 2004 in the North Ossetian town of Beslan. The periodic publishing of terrorism-related literature attests to one fact – terrorism remains a chronic and non-eradicable security problem. In fact, the hostage-taking crisis in Beslan demonstrates that the international terrorist network, with al-Qa'ida as its poster-child, remains potent, audacious, determined and above all undeterrable.

The violence in Beslan reinforces three realities about the nature of modern terrorism motivated by an Islamist factor. First, as a form of coercive conduct terrorism is different from the struggle for national liberation; adhering to a politically neutral and non-grievance-based definition of terrorism makes clear this distinction.

Second, states remain asymmetrically vulnerable to the ideologically unified global terrorist network because conventional deterrence cannot be brought to bear against it. It is therefore important to avoid conceiving of current strategy against terrorism as temporal 'war,' and understand it as an endless struggle. Determining how to reduce the threat of terrorism, while accepting that states must live with the risk of falling victim to terrorist violence, will remain one of the greatest security challenges for democratic societies.

Notes:

[1]Comparison with Robert Bothwell, The Big Chill: Canada and the Cold War (Toronto: CIIA, 1998).

[2]The use of the term *noncombatant* is congruent with the interpretation of the U.S. State Department: "in addition to civilians," noncombatants also include "military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty." Furthermore, "attacks on military installations or on armed military personnel" are also considered as acts of terrorism "when a state of military hostilities does not exist at the site." United States, Department of State, Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002, May 2003, Washington D.C., 11 April 2004 <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2002/html/19977.htm>.

[3]United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, Terrorism, Corruption, and Human Trafficking, Vienna, 11 April 2004 <http://www.undcp.org/odccp/terrorism_definitions.html>.

[4]Boaz Ganor, "Defining Terrorism: Is One Man's Terrorist Another Man's Freedom Fighter?" International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 2002, Herzlia, 1 October 2003 <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/define.htm>.

[5]Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," American Foreign Policy: Theoretical Essays, ed. G. John Ikenberry (New York: Longman, 2002) 590.

[6]David Rapoport, "The Politics of Atrocity," Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, eds. Yonah Alexander and Saymour Maxwell Finger (New York: John Jay, 1977) 47.

[7]"According to FSB, There are 80 Martyrs Prepared for Committing Suicide Terrorism in Russia," Newsru.com 29 October 2004 <http://www.newsru.com/russia/29oct2004/deadd.html>

[8]Frank P. Harvey, "Addicted to Security: Globalized Terrorism and the Inevitability of American Unilateralism," International Journal 59.1 (Winter 2003-2004): 4.

[9]Michael Barkun, "Defending Against the Apocalypse: The Limits of Homeland Security," Policy Options 23.6 (September 2002): 30.

[10]United States, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) 364.

[11]Ray Takeyh, and Nikolas Gvosdev, "Do Terrorist Networks Need A Home?" The Washington Quarterly 25:3 (Summer 2002): 98.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Joseph S. Nye, The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone (New York: Oxford UP, 2002) x.

[14]Robert O. Keohane, "The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and the 'Liberalism of Fear'," Dialog-IO (Spring 2002): 34-35.

[15]Thomas L. Friedman, "War of Ideas, Part 1," The New York Times 8 January 2004 <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/08/opinion/08FRIE.html >.

[16]Brian Michael Jenkins, Countering Al-Qaeda (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002) 25.

[17]Keohane 34.

[18]Lee Harris, "Al Qaeda's Fantasy Ideology," Policy Review 114 (August/September 2002): 23.

[19]Ibid., 29.

[20]Ibid., 21-22.

[21]Benjamin R. Barber, "Jihad Vs. McWorld," Global Issues 94/95, ed. Robert M. Jackson (Guilfod: Dushkin, 1994) 23.

[22]Michael Howard, "What's in a Name?: How to Fight Terrorism," Foreign Affairs 81.1 (January/February 2002): 10.

[23]Shmuel Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," Policy Review 125 (Jun/Jul 2004): 30.

[24]Frank C. Schuller, and Thomas D. Grant, "Terror: Measuring the Cost, Calculating the Response," Current History 101.654 (April 2002): 184.

[25]Harris 33.

[26]United States, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States 363.

[27]Bruce Hoffman, Lessons of 9/11 (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002) 26.

[28]Harvey 6-7.

[29]Usama bin Ladin, "Full Transcript of bin Ladin's Speech," Aljazeera.Net English, 1 November 2004 <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/79C6AF22-98FB-4A1C-B21F-2BC36E87F61F.htm>.

[30]Harvey 13.

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